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ABSTRACT

"General Education Today: A Critical Analysis of Controversies, Practices, and Reforms" (A 248-page book by Jerry G. Gaff, published by Jossey-Bass in 1983) is reviewed here as an important contribution to the abundant literature on general education. America is currently undergoing a general education revival. Part I of Gaff's book gives a good sense of what is going on. Discussed in this part are the plethora of current activities and the controversies they have generated. Part II tells how the curriculum is changing. Chapters deal with philosophies, emerging curricular practices, teaching, redesigning courses, faculty development, support needs, funding, and evaluation. Part III is an excellent hands-on guide to change in general education which covers successful change strategies and errors that should be avoided. The only drawback of this otherwise top-notch book is that the attempt to cover the entire range of current practices and philosophies leaves general education without a clear identity. (DC)

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"A Plumbers' Manual on General Education": Must Reading for Curriculum Committees

General Education Today: A Critical Analysis of Controversies, Practices, and Reforms by Jerry G. Gaff. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1983, xxii + 248 pages, $15.95.

America is undergoing a general education revival. Institutions from coast to coast, from University of Southern Maine and University of the Pacific to Florida A and M and North Dakota State University, are developing new programs. In fact, it seems almost every college I visit lately is examining its general education program in one way or another.

One of the consequences of this movement has been a proliferation of publications. The number of new articles and books on general education has doubled in the past decade. There are histories, philosophies, analyses, descriptions, proposals and recommendations, self-help manuals, and a near cornucopia of institutional sagas detailing the reform efforts of individual colleges. Accounts of and reactions to the recent Harvard initiative seem to top the list. Much of this literature demonstrates a clear commitment to quantity, irrelevant of quality considerations. As a whole it is an embarrassing collection of writings— not carefully thought out, full of jargon, and pompously self-righteous.

With all of this, Jerry Gaff has added yet another book to the collection. Part I of his volume discusses the plethora of current general education activities and the controversies they have generated. There are chapters on the recent developments and their rationales, as well as the national and campus actors and their points of view.

Part II is concerned with general education practice. One chapter looks at the myriad of philosophies which currently undergird general education. Another discusses emerging curricular practices. A third deals with teaching, redesigning of courses and faculty development. And the final chapter in the section is concerned with curricular support needs, funding, and the evaluation of general education.

Part III of Gaff's book is on general education change. The two chapters cover successful change strategies and the errors that should be avoided.

The appendices are worthy of note. One contains the responses from a national survey that Gaff did in general education practices. Results are rather interesting, though their general application is uncertain. The second appendix is a partial listing of institutions around the country engaged in serious general education reform. It is a good resource for institutions to find nearby colleges and comparable schools already engaged in general education reform.

Without a doubt Jerry Gaff's book is an important contribution to the literature on general education. Gaff knows more about recent general education reform efforts than perhaps anyone else in the country. He directed a three-year national project seeking to change the general education programs at a nationwide consortium of colleges and universities of every type and shape. He has been a consultant at institutions all across America. He has conducted workshops for hundreds of colleges, and he has engaged in a number of general education research projects.

This volume reflects Gaff's wealth of experience. Part I gives a good sense of what is going on. Part II tells how the curriculum is changing. It is the most complete discussion in print. There is a great deal of original research, both anecdotal and survey.

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The writing is more descriptive than critical. The third section is the best hands-on guide to change in general education I have seen.

Gaff has written the best plumbers' manual I know of on general education. This book should be must reading for curriculum committees and individuals charged with overseeing general education programs.

Over the past several years, I've worked with quite a few curriculum committees and deans in developing new general education programs. Their assignments have been hard. Most of us in academe are trained in a single discipline and few are educated in curriculum development. So it is difficult to think about planning a new program that goes across all disciplines. As a result curriculum committees seem to ask two questions regularly—what is general education? how do you go about changing it?

Gaff answers both questions. He does a superb job on number two. If I have a criticism of this volume, it is the way Gaff answers question one. He describes current practice and the miasma of philosophies associated with it. The result is that general education emerges without a clear identity. It becomes all things to all people. There is an element of President Eisenhower's dictum that all people ought to have a religion; some religion, any religion, just so long as they have a religion. General education is in trouble today because we are more certain of the number of credits that should be required than we are of its purpose. By offering a top-notch volume on normative practice, Gaff necessarily perpetuates this problem. This is unfortunate because he has written an exceptionally useful book which will be widely read.

—Arthur Levine

ARTHUR LEVINE is president of Bradford College which has recently adopted a new general education program. He is the author of *Quest for Common Learning* (with Ernest L. Boyer) and *Handbook on Undergraduate Curriculum.*